

The National Cemetery Administration and Department of Defense Response to COVID-19 Regarding Funerals and Military Honors

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Overview

The [National Cemetery Administration](#) (NCA), part of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), is responsible for providing interment benefits to [eligible veterans and dependents](#) and for administering America's [national veterans' cemeteries](#). Veteran benefits for interment in a national cemetery include the gravesite and grave liner, opening and closing of the grave, government headstone or marker, U.S. burial flag, Presidential Memorial Certificate, and the perpetual care of the gravesite. These benefits are provided at no cost to the family.

NCA operates 142 national cemeteries and 133 soldiers' lots and monuments sites in 40 states and Puerto Rico. Over 4 million Americans, including veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in one of NCA's sites. As localities grapple with the spread of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), NCA has temporarily adjusted its procedures regarding burials scheduled to take place in a national cemetery.

Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Defense (DOD), [Office of Army Cemeteries](#), and not NCA. It sits on 639 acres of land near Washington, DC and is the [final resting spot for nearly 400,000](#) active duty servicemembers, veterans, and their families. Interment in [ANC is restricted to certain eligible veterans and their dependents](#), and is considered the most prestigious veterans cemetery in the nation. In response to the spread of COVID-19, ANC has also adjusted its procedures for visitation and interments. Both VA and DOD have also made alterations to the rendering of military funeral honors.

NCA Cemetery Operating Status

In a [March 20 press release](#), NCA announced that, beginning March 23, VA national cemeteries will remain open for interments for veterans and eligible individuals but will adjust overall operations. These adjustments include the following:

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- all [committal services](#) are discontinued until further notice;
- all rendering of military funeral honors, either by military personnel or volunteer organizations, are discontinued until further notice; and
- only immediate family members (limited to no more than 10 individuals) of the deceased individual may witness the interment.

NCA is to work with the families of the deceased whose committal or memorial service has been postponed to reschedule at a later date when it is deemed safe to do so. For those families who need to schedule an interment, the [National Cemetery Scheduling Office in St. Louis](#) is to continue to provide scheduling services. The scheduling office can be contacted at 800-535-1117, option 1.

Other changes implemented by NCA in response to COVID-19 have been posted on NCA's [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages. On March 18, NCA asked all visitors and families to adhere to CDC recommendations for group gatherings as well as any community restrictions put in place by the state or local governments for both the locale of the national cemetery as well as where the visitor and family resides. These restrictions can include visitations and travel. This policy remains in effect.

For those national cemeteries that sit on an active DOD military installations, such as Rock Island National Cemetery, Fort Leavenworth National Cemetery, and Fort Richardson National Cemetery, visitors and family members are asked to contact the cemetery directly for changes in operating status.

NCA Guidance to Funeral Directors

NCA has also issued guidance for funeral directors who are working with families to plan services for their loved ones. With committal ceremonies no longer being conducted as of March 23, funeral directors were instructed that no more than 10 immediate family members may witness the interment. In addition, NCA informed organizers that it has discouraged all cemetery personnel from handshaking and any unnecessary physical contact with family members and funeral organizers.

In a March 27 email to funeral directors, NCA announced a change in NCA's floral arrangement policy, stating national cemeteries will not accept floral arrangements with direct interments. If families wish to place a floral arrangement at the gravesite, NCA said families may do so after 4:30 pm on the day of interment or anytime thereafter and are limited to two arrangements at the gravesite.

NCA Updates

NCA is directing the public to check its [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages for the most recent updates. In addition, NCA has created an "[Alerts](#)" [web page](#) so the public may find updates and details on individual cemeteries' operating status.

Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) and Military Funeral Honors

On March 23, [ANC announced that it will be closed to visitors](#) effective March 24. Family pass holders and other funeral service attendees are to be directed through enhanced security screening by ANC and law enforcement staff upon arrival. ANC is in compliance with DOD policies and the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) guidelines](#) regarding social distancing measures. For the latest information, see the [Coronavirus: DOD Response](#) site on the outbreak and its coordination efforts with other agencies. [Effective March 30](#), the Army announced that all eligible servicemembers and veterans from all branches who are interred at ANC will continue to receive military funeral honors with the following elements:

- a casket team (body bearers or pallbearers, usually six servicemembers);

- a firing party (seven servicemembers);
- a bugler (one bandsman);
- folding and presentation of the U.S. flag (same personnel from casket team);
- a non-commissioned officer or officer in charge; and
- a chaplain, if requested by the family.

[Military funeral honors with escort](#) (size varies according to the rank of the deceased) are suspended at this time since funeral attendance will be limited to 10 people or fewer. Military funeral honors with escort include all the elements above as well as a horse-drawn caisson and military band, if requested by the family. Family members who have questions regarding an upcoming scheduled funeral or who wish to reschedule a service to a later date may contact ANC at 1-877- 907-8585. Additional ANC guidance is provided at its [COVID-19 Information](#) site.

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